

Trash or treasure? Families and their beloved possessions

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Whether it's grandpa's piano or a Nintendo Wii, certain objects become a part of family routines and histories. A new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research* helps explain why some possessions wind up in permanent storage or get tossed away, while others are kept for generations.

Amber M. Epp (University of Wisconsin-Madison) and Linda L. Price (University of Arizona, Tucson) conducted a two-year case study that tracked the origins, movements, and placement of one family's objects. "It is not necessarily the history of an object that rescues it from being discarded, but also its place in a network of other objects, practices, and spaces that determine whether and when it's replaceable," the authors write.

"Our study suggests that families should consider the downstream consequences when introducing new products or services into their homes," the authors write. "It's important for families to be conscious about which activities or objects are important to preserve, especially during times of change."

As an example, the authors point out the ways [family](#) patterns shift when a new object enters the home. The authors use a Nintendo Wii as an example: "It may create new uses for spaces and solutions for how to prevent sound from spilling out into other rooms. It could shift interaction patterns among family members, creating new gaming practices among some and abandoning other practices such as watching

TV together in the evenings," the authors write.

"If marketers want their products to survive as a part of a family's everyday practices of 'doing family,' they need to consider how a new product will fit into an ensemble of family practices," the authors write.

The study also reveals that storage facilities are not always a last stop before a garage sale or donation to charity. Families move items out of storage and integrate them back into daily life. "This is great news for marketers who think that there is nothing left for a product once it's moved out of a family's routines," the authors write. "Revisiting an earlier example, if the family eventually decided to move their Nintendo Wii into storage, there is a chance that they might reincorporate it later."

More information: Amber M. Epp and Linda L. Price. "The Storied Life of Singularized Objects: Forces of Agency and Network Transformation." [Journal of Consumer Research](#): February 2010 (published online June 2, 2009).

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